

Ideologies, Myths and Belief systems

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Cultural Structures and Systems

In an anthology by Lawrence E. Harrison and Samuel Huntington from the late 1990s, “*Culture Matters*,” we find an article by Orlando Patterson, who describes contemporary cultural research as follows: “*In the humanities and liberal circles generally, a rigid orthodoxy now prevails that can be summarized as follows: Culture is a symbolic system to be interpreted, understood, discussed, delineated, respected, and celebrated as the distinctive product of a particular group of people, of equal worth with all other such products. But it should never be used to explain anything about the people who produced it.*”ⁱ

If this is representative, then the significance of cultural variation is disallowed. Such interpretations do not defend culture as an explanatory principle. The understanding of society has far too often been left to people who want to provide an overall explanation of human behavior on the basis of material conditions and individual decisions.

Even though the leading structural functionalist Talcott Parson spoke in terms of cultural systems, social systems and personality systems, in addition to the biological organism, the physical environment and an ultimate reality, much of his theoretical constructs were ultimately based on observed structures rather than on systematic theory in the strictest sense. In hindsight, his theories have been criticized for being too abstract and too general, ill-suited to prediction and falsification, and for not being open to conflict analyses. But whatever may be said about Parson’s form of structural functionalism, there are other options for studying culture in the context of a system.

A guiding principle for such studies is that they must not assume that every cultural form of daily life necessarily constitutes a coherent system. On the other hand, on an analytical level, cultural forms can be analyzed as several systems, which in part complement and balance one another, provided they are not in direct conflict. Here it is important to emphasize what we mean by “system,” as opposed to “structure.” Axiomatic researchers have defined several notions of system. The criteria for a mathematical system cannot be fully applied to the study of living beings. The notion of system as employed in biology is necessarily different than that which is employed in the social sciences and in disciplines that study thinking human beings. Before anything can be analyzed as a system in sociology, it must meet four criteria:

1. The elements being studied must be mutually dependent on, or formative for, one another.
2. The elements being studied must be a part of a whole, which is delimited by the world around them.
3. This whole must relate to external entities; we will usually find mutual dependence between related systems.
4. The studied whole must contain self-maintaining or reproductive characteristics.

Language, for example, can be analyzed in such a light from a systematic perspective. So can ethics and legal regulations. Theology and various philosophical outlooks on life can also be made amenable to systematic analysis. The common denominator for all these systems is that they share an inner logic. In the discipline of sociology, there are a number of classic works that have dealt with cultural phenomena from a systematic perspective and have accordingly been able to point up consequences over time, consequences that might have been unintended by the social players. Most familiar is perhaps Max Weber’s study of how the Protestant Ethic facilitated the spread of materialistic capitalism. These studies display a cultural dynamic associated with identifiable systems, while the consequences, over time, cannot be adapted to the interests or goals of the players in the system. The studies also show interaction between cultural and economic systems, although the one should not be determined by the other.

Not all cultural system building is compatible with sociological models for relationships between cultural and social forms. The semiotics of the linguistic disciplines can become so fixated on texts that references to an external – and potentially falsifiable – reality are weakened. This is particularly the case in a

number of postmodern textual analyses, based on the assumption that meaning lies in linguistic distinctions and is unrelated to the orientation and external challenges of individuals. Such studies can help sociologists understand why many groups become lost in a world of interpretations and perceptions of reality, even when a change in course would have been prudent in view of the external reality. On the other hand, these studies will fall short if what we are looking for is an explanation of why some groups and societies manage to find functional answers to their challenges, while others become increasingly bogged down in dysfunctional forms of adjustment.

There are several aspects of a dominant culture that could be studied from a systematic perspective. Our point of departure in this study was whether western interpretive culture provides satisfactory answers to the challenges confronting us on the threshold of the 21st Century. Or, to be more specific: whether new liberal attitudes, which have predominated in modern societies since 1989, represent the ultimate answer to the challenge of modernity, or whether new liberalism itself is an ideology with the same set of seductive characteristics as ideologies. Before we take a closer look at this question, we would like to comment on how ideologies can be understood as cultural systems.

Studies of Ideologies

The concept of ideology is over 200 years old. And though, from a purely etymological point of view, it has always meant the study of ideas (from *idea* and *logos*), the political meaning of the word has undergone considerable change over the years. Destutt de Tracy, a theoretician living during the French Revolution, used the term to denote a program for the scientific study of the spread of ideas. Napoleon used it as a term of derision for impractical and far-fetched ideas. For others, the term has been a badge of honor, meaning something along the lines of a captivating, idealistic unified view. Karl Marx regarded ideologies as social deceptions ruled by social agents.ⁱⁱ

Many have wanted to build further on Marxist assumptions on how ideologies primarily promote the interests of an economic upper class, and on presuppositions about how Marxist principles, properly understood, could be regarded as a means of liberating themselves from ideological constraints.ⁱⁱⁱ A number of social scientists have taken the Marxist assumptions about class positions as a key to

understanding what constitutes social interests and the basis for people's choice of ideological interpretation. Even non-Marxist writers have often regarded ideologies as socially determined perceptions of reality, shaped more by social interests than by epistemology.^{iv}

Ultimately, more and more scholars have come to regard Marxism not just as one ideology among many others, nor even as an archetypal ideology. Karl Mannheim, preeminent sociologist of knowledge, was the first person to make systematic comparisons of the world views of the various political parties of his day and age as variations on an ideological concept. His analysis is contained in *Ideology and Utopia*, written in the late 1920s and based primarily on his German experiences. Mannheim's comprehensive concept of ideology could have led to social relativization of the understanding of ideologies, which would then have helped ward off single-minded fanaticism. But it also spawned epistemological problems concerning the status of his ideological analysis. If all political theories were understood as ideological and interest-governed, then even Mannheim's analyses would have attained the status of something relative and interest-governed. It was not easy to define all political views as ideologies, which meant perceptions were determined by specific social interests. And defining some views as ideological, but not others, proved problematic, at least in the absence of concrete evidence to substantiate intellectual superiority of the latter.^v References to judgments by "free-floating intellectuals" were an unsatisfactory solution to that problem.

The main problem studying ideologies after that time has been finding a common platform that is universal enough to serve as a springboard for comparative studies. In one sense, an analytical platform set at an abstract level had to be constructed in order to observe the striking similarities and contrasts between social perceptions that could be termed ideological. On the other hand, analytical substance in a formal context should not be so abstract that any contact with the concrete political struggle becomes too remote.

In practice, determining the typical characteristics of political ideologies will depend on a hermeneutical approach to the ideologies. This approach could be met with counter-ideologies and critique. Even if this does not result in permanently valid ideological determination, our claim here proves that it is possible to list several common traits of all the major ideologies that have had an impact on political life in our part of the world over the past two centuries.

It is important to analyze these ideologies – and, to a certain extent, debunk them – not just because they were key elements in modern political society. Societies based on mass mobilization in support of political decisions are indebted to a set of simplistic and appealing notions regarding the tasks and potential of society. Ideologies should be recognized and possibly risen above, primarily because the simplifications following in their wake tend to lead to a social distortion of reality and irrational forms of adjustment.

It can be difficult indeed for social scientists to maintain neutrality in such analyses. On the other hand, not all analyses of ideology will hinge on their determining the truest and most rational social interpretation. Researchers are also useful when they can submit convincing arguments for what is clearly not rational, or for what lies beyond the scope of that which is rational and acceptable, leaving it up to others to choose a political course within the framework of the “acceptable.” This kind of falsifying, or negative goal, often seems more realistic than a positive one.

Although discovering the hallmark categories of ideology so that comparative studies can be performed is both possible and important, this does not mean that every aspect of the major ideologies matches a system’s criteria. Even ideologies with the same political orientation can, in practice, appear both varied and vague at the same time. The use of ideologies like these is often fraught with opportunism. Nevertheless, it is possible to list a number of recurring hallmarks of ideologies that enable us to compare systems.

Analytical Hallmarks of Ideologies

In Marxist and anti-Marxist literature alike, we find at least five formal criteria for ideologies: system context, interest-dependency, reality distortion, the adversely affected party, and self-immunization.^{vi} Let’s take a closer look at each of these hallmarks:

1. *System context:* For thoughts or interpretations to be categorized as ideologies, they must comprise a continuous flow of perceptions in which one claim enhances the reliability of the other. An ideology

used by many as a point of reference must contain a number of mutually dependent principles for social analysis. Its systematic character will thus be recognizable, because it is not possible to eliminate one part without affecting the other parts of the social interpretation. Before we characterize something as ideology, the interpretations concerned should also have been applied by many, and over a period of time. Situation-governed devices for justifying a particular standpoint do not qualify as ideological analyses.

2. *Interest-dependency*: The appeal and spread of ideologies is to a large extent based on social interests rather than on the weight of superior arguments. Suggesting some form of dependency between interests and perspectives does not, however, justify the claim that what we are dealing with is an ideology. Most perceptions have some sort of affinity for personal motivation or social interest. To prevent everything from being grouped together under an umbrella of ideological determination, the term should be reserved for interests that are particularistic while pretending to be universalistic or serving a general purpose.

3. *Distortion of reality*: Ideologies should be exposed and recognized as such because, in one way or other, they represent a distorted perception of reality, usually a kind of “false consciousness.” To claim that something is false and not merely at odds with our own perceptions and interests, we must be able to show that a stated claim is clearly inconsistent with experience or with a logical way of thinking, or that the interpretations in question are clearly less functional than plausible alternative interpretations. Demonstrating that we are up against arguments with non-falsifiable metaphysical and axiomatic principles does not, in itself, qualify as ideological determination. No interpretations lack presuppositions. Nor should all types of human assessment error and maladjustments be traced back to ideologies. False assessments that originate from the personality traits of a given player, or from coincidental situation-governed circumstances, lie beyond the scope of the present discussion.
4. *The adversely affected party*: In the literature on ideologies, the notion that some people will be suppressed or adversely affected if a reigning ideology remains predominant is a recurring theme. There are often several reasons why reality-distorted notions, defended by people with

vested interests, will ultimately cause people to lose touch with reality and also lead to an increasing number of maladjustments, which are bound to affect something or somebody. This “something or somebody” need not consist of social categories such as class or gender. The fact that the ideology-exposing literature still suffers from a lopsided emphasis on major – and potentially strong – groups as those most adversely affected is undoubtedly due to a hope that these very groups will be motivated enough to break free from the dominant ideology. This is understood clearest when a person develops a rebellious and vengeful streak as they learn to view themselves as one of “the suppressed.” Nevertheless, we must take into consideration how an adversely affected party in a reality-distorted ideology might in fact be Mother Nature herself, future generations, a specific civilization or society on a grand scale, for that matter.

5. *Self-immunization*: Since, analytically speaking, ideologies enjoy an intellectual status other than the one they invoke, it is only reasonable to expect that people who have benefited from a specific ideology will do their utmost to ward off close scrutiny and criticism. Individual defenders of an ideology are not the only ones with such needs. We

can expect to find immanent interpretations built into the ideological system for the purpose of defending social groups against intimidating arguments. Systems of self-immunization, closely related to the general system of political interpretation, often have easily recognizable structures. Arguments threatening the credibility of an ideology are not always met with superior intellectual arguments. Such arguments are more often generally interpreted as expressions of particular interest on the part of hostile persons, groups, classes or nations. More to the point, an ideology may present itself as indisputable, as representing reason, science, history, modernity or progress.

This list could undoubtedly have been extended, but then the categorization would have excluded a number of social interpretations that should be included in comparisons to enhance our insight into ideologies. The goal here was not to maximize precision, but rather to highlight certain key contexts.

These five hallmarks should be sufficient for recognizing ideologies, even in the face of social interpretations that are not presented as ideological. This list should also help us focus on the search for ideologies' system characteristics. It applies, first and foremost, to a way of thinking, the system characteristics of a society or the relationship between society and the individual. An ideology that offers a simplistic and appealing interpretation of this relationship can be expected to support mutually supportive interpretations. Not only will an ideology accentuate key elements, but, based on earlier comments on self-immunization, we can safely

assume that an ideology will also reject interpretations dependent on ideologically inconsistent premises. And in view of the social sciences' quest for perspectives, we might expect to discover considerable disparity here between ideological and research-oriented attitudes.

In addition to the systems of thought, we could probably detect system characteristics in the social utilization of ideologies as well. The interaction between specific interests and the choice of ideological interpretation is hardly coincidental.

An ideology depends on credibility. All ideologies represent interpretations that put competing ideologies in a bad light. Nevertheless, the most substantive references for credibility are on a different level than mutual competition among ideologies. We need to distinguish between ideologies, myths and beliefs.

The Dependence of Ideologies on Myth

A recurring theme of ideologies is that they are designed to unite and stimulate collective action. Their credibility is often closely tied to the traits of specific leaders or parties, which are perceived as representing specific groups or life forms that are distinctive from other leaders, groups and life forms. An ideology is often skewed toward an antagonistic relationship to conflicting ideologies. This implies that an ideology's credibility depends on an overarching justification of its attempt to express what is rational, good or just.

Social myths enter the picture at this point, and not only those with a clear political imprint. Nowadays, myths, from the Greek word *mythos*, are spread and interpreted in variety of ways.^{vii} By no means can it be taken for granted that the most important myths in contemporary society are labeled and recognized as myths. As a rule, myths are perceived as concrete, often personified, accounts that provide us with dramatic pictures and explanations of the world order. Myths may be used to spread a religious message and to make the substance of politicized ideologies believable.^{viii} But myths are primarily tall tales, not ideological programs or religious beliefs.

Myths are often reminiscent of the sagas. A saga usually tells the story of a specific historical character, e.g. a central figure in a heroic battle. As opposed to fairy-

tales, sagas purport to relate actual historic events. We should guard against a hasty dichotomizing of the antithetical terms mythos/logos.

The question as to how true or false myths really are does not necessarily enter into an analytical delimitation of myths. If “myths” are automatically assumed to represent what is false – as is often the case – then an anti-myth can easily attain a status of being true because it is in opposition to the myth in question, which leads to an oversimplification. We expose a myth the same way that we expose an ideology – by using analytical criteria. As a working breakdown of myths, the following five hallmarks are typical for what are called myths:

1. Myths refer to familiar notions that purport to say something important about our lives.
2. Myths give shape to a universal struggle by reducing it to a conflict between two forces.
3. Myths incite our involvement by dramatizing these two forces as expressions of good and evil. There need not be equilibrium in the presentation of the two. As long as the one has been determined to be unequivocally good or bad, the other has thereby been defined.
4. Myths are archetypal or repetitive in character. It is up to alert guardians to remind us of their presence in shifting guises in ever changing situations. People can be taught to recognize the mythical drama in a given situation through specific codes or symbols.
5. Myths are usually geared more toward mobilizing the individual mind than toward inciting collective political action. They can be directed toward the cultural sphere rather than the political arena.

We have only to look at political history to find examples of contemporary tales that fit better in a framework of myths than in a rational analytical framework. This holds true even for frequently told stories of how enlightenment and rational democracy appeared on the historical scene just in the nick of time.

In the handed-down accounts of the French Revolution, the decisive, but relatively non-dramatic weapon thefts from the Invalides are played down in favor of the events surrounding the subsequent gunpowder theft from the Bastille prison on July 14. This was an event with all the ingredients of battle and blood, since the forces assigned to defend the fortress shot about 100 people before they surrendered and were massacred by their captors. What clinched the fortress’ fall, however, were the canons from a deserting military unit that joined forces with the rebels. In the

mythical recounting of events, those who rammed the barricades were spoken of as “the people.” This wasn’t just because women and children took part in the battles, but because through the destruction of an opponent symbolizing the old regime the people were able to become bearers of their own sovereignty, while the concept of popular sovereignty was embellished. Soon “the people” became synonymous with “the nation.” Previously, the people (*le peuple*) in the French state had meant all Frenchmen, or that part of the population not belonging to the nobility, whereas *la nation* was represented by the politically privileged: the authoritative elite. Now the nation was perceived as a society of justice comprised of citizens of equal rank and rights. Those who voluntarily embraced the law, i.e. those who relinquished their privileges, were permitted to be part of the nation. Those who were more inclined to fight for their privileges became enemies of the nation.

In this new picture of the people's battle with their enemies, it became necessary to elaborate on those circumstances that could specifically make it clear that the old regime had kept the people in bondage. The popular attack on the Bastille, which from the rebels’ viewpoint was mainly because they wanted to get its hands on some gunpowder, was mythically presented as a battle to liberate the people from the yoke of bondage. At the outset, this motive was hardly more than a secondary consideration. Even in hindsight this explanation seems strained, since at the time of the attack, the Bastille was only holding seven prisoners: two were mentally ill, one was a forger, and one was an aristocrat!

Mythological stories about July 14 convey one interpretation that is presented as politically correct: the one about the people’s righteous battle against tyranny, and about a victory that must be won, over and over again, in order to secure the people’s freedom and sovereignty. The violent events of that day were an outgrowth of the suppression under the old regime. The overthrow of the old regime’s representatives marked a violent but necessary transition to a new and more liberated order.

There is more than one reason for calling this mythical: not just because this type of story represents only one particular version of events or simply because many of the details and facts that did not tally with the story were either hushed up or distorted. Basically, what makes it mythical is the fact that its presentation has a typical form, one that is intended to say something important about many later political events. This story dramatizes a complex conflict – a battle between the suppressed and their suppressers, a fight between good and evil, and does so in

such a way that key interpreters can later use symbols from the story in order to get people to relive a drama that presumably provides an explanatory basic pattern for “correct” orientation even in our time.

Both short-term and long-term historical interpretations have their own mythical elements.^{ix} Where interpretations refer to such a basic mythical pattern, we can expect even the ideologies and political discourse to be cast in a special mold to which they must adapt.

The Dependence of Myths on Belief

A certain story about The Great Revolution as the victory of freedom over the suppressors and the victory of reason over superstition fits the mythical pattern. So could a story from the opposite viewpoint, which describes the defeat of a civilized order and the disorder of rabble-rousers. Myths are not designed as analytical presentations of the kinds of social factors most likely to ensure a reasonable balance between individual liberty and supra-individual order and the kinds of cultural circumstances that could lead to social upheaval and arbitrary abuse of power, or to a calcified order that benefits only the few. In mythical accounts, there is conflict between good and evil – either freedom versus constraint or order versus chaos.

Traditionally, liberal groups have rallied around myths of the former type, whereas conservative groups tend to prefer myths of the latter type. It is easy to see that these preferences are not coincidental and that they are geared to a variety of social interests. All the same, the potential power of ideologies and myths is not explained. To gain acceptance, a myth must be compatible with deep-seated notions in a given culture; it is not enough that it is compatible with certain ideologies.

The notion that all we have to do is fight for freedom is closely linked to the belief that human beings are inherently good and that, given half a chance, they will behave with integrity. The notion that morality depends on a certain cultural order stems largely from the belief that human beings are egotistical and anarchistic, that they can behave decently only within a civilizational or religious framework. Faith in the noble savage can be regarded as a counter-faith to the doctrine of original sin. If two or more forms of faith can be pitted against each other, liberal

spokesmen tend to view this as an incentive to individual choice. But this is by no means a foregone conclusion. Truth and credibility are not necessarily synonymous with popularity.

Several controversial questions concerning belief and morality can be answered by referring to logic or to a systematic empiricism. But this does not answer all our questions. Reason and research are not necessarily unambiguous, since arguments depend on premises and categories that are often culturally dependent. When reason and research arbitrate and resolve ideological controversies, this tends to lead to a negative culling process – that is, it points to what is not credible, rather than aiding the formation of a comprehensive world view. This kind of negatively charged research can also be provocative, particularly among those who invoke humanity and research when justifying their views. This applies to a number of interpretations of people's natural morality and innate reason^x.

Even though a certain program of modernity implies that reason and research should enjoy an overarching ontological status, the experimental research method implies that reality, *an sich*, isn't unambiguously accessible to the senses. Nor can logic encompass everything. The program for explaining everything with the help of rational, causal analyses leads us to conclude that it is impossible. Rationally speaking, causal analyses lead to the concept of the initial cause, which must be its own cause and thus must be categorically different from what follows. Logic leads us to a starting point that cannot be grasped logically, one that argumentation nevertheless must presuppose. This, then, is a rationalistic basis for rejecting deterministic categories as exhaustive.

This type of reasoning can lead to the conclusion that acknowledgment involves an element of faith and that culture is dependent on collective beliefs. In this context, faith means axiomatic choices of categories of understanding in relation to the acknowledgment that such categories provide.

In light of the above, an approach to “systems of belief” will only be able to capture certain aspects of the collective faith that religion typifies. Without trying to list all the reasons why we can expect to find religion as a hallmark of human cultures, we will mention two of them.

One of these has to do with people's need to feel a sense of security. From an emotional, ethical and even cognitive standpoint, people depend on mutual

structure and on certainty. Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote at length about how certainty presupposes trust, without our being able – strictly speaking – to prove what we take for granted.^{xi} But for such a perception of reality to be meaningful and functional, there must first be a cultural institutionalization based on premises other than the strictly rationalistic.

By extending this type of reasoning, we can claim that no unified perception of reality can be established apart from hypothetical premises, which in a certain sense contain an element of faith. Strictly speaking, the existence or non-existence of God can no more be proved or disproved than historic determinism or indeterminism.

Dissimilar cultures are constructed around different but specific answers to these questions. Christian culture has maintained the existence of both a divine order and an individual accountability – that is, indeterminism in an essential field of reality. Islamic culture, by and large, has regarded the social sector as being determined by Allah's will. Buddhist culture has basically perceived reality as being determined by major repetitions, but without a personal God being behind the determinism. Humanists have usually taken a non-deistic view of reality, in which natural explanations are perceived as an adjustment to deterministic laws, while human values and individual freedom have been linked to an extreme emphasis on indeterminism.

The sociologist and moral philosopher Zygmunt Bauman has given an account of different cultures in relation to their choice of “life strategy” with respect to death and a consciousness of the risk of death.^{xii} The religious response has consisted of identifying true life with the soul and immortality. What he calls “the modern strategy” has consisted of identifying with social groups and politico-cultural movements and fighting for their supra-individual survival. Furthermore, it consisted of an attempt to deconstruct the insolubility of death into specific problems that can be resolved at the individual level, such as health and accident insurance. Different life strategies predispose people to a predilection for widely different institutions and orientations.

A “meaningful life” usually means one with purpose, a life where sorrows are counterbalanced by pleasures, a life where the overall goal gives direction to minor goals and purpose to major sacrifices. When people write and speak at length about a “cry for meaning,” they are thinking about something more than finding

explanations for what is happening in people's surroundings and for the need to have order in their daily lives.^{xiii} In this context, “meaning” denotes something qualitatively important, something not necessarily found through mundane social interaction.

Meaning in this last sense of the word has to do with the human longing to find an explanation and a justification for the most difficult and critical challenges of life. It is meaning at this level that can inspire efforts beyond egocentric calculation and can get people to want to control their impulsive actions in favor of more exalted goals. Our development as moral beings is closely related to the question of whether we can succeed in adapting our lives to this kind of framework of meaning.

Even though the acquisition and development of meaning have important personal aspects, no civilization can relegate meaning to the status of a strictly private matter, with important social tasks reduced to supplying the necessities of life and maintaining a modicum of law and order. Communicative social bonds presuppose a common culture, also in the sense of common frameworks of meaning. Without these frameworks, society's social bonds would ultimately disintegrate. From such a viewpoint, development and the maintenance of an adequate framework of meaning is imperative to ensure long-term viability of any society.

Deductively, this can lead to the conclusion that in all cultures we can expect to find, not only a collective faith in axiomatic values, but an institutionalized religion as well. This jibes with Berelson and Steiner’s empirical inventory, that “all societies have religion(s).”^{xiv} In cases where the socially supported religion is not transcendental in nature, we can expect political ideas to have a religious hue. This applies not just to ideologies in totalitarian societies. Even a belief in liberal humanity can assume religious forms. We will return later to the subject of the cult of human rights in our kind of society.

Functional Analysis

Based on this type of reasoning, religion in a social context can be regarded as a conglomeration of sacrosanct rites which revolve around axiomatic values that involve an element of faith. Moreover, we can conclude that ideologies, myths and beliefs can all be analyzed in terms of systems within a cultural context.

The significance of being able to define ideologies, myths and beliefs as systems lies in the fact that they can figure in cultural explanations. This, in turn, means that such systems can figure in functional analyses.

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